

From Pew to Prayer Closet

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Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture*, Aldershot, Hants, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. x + 235 pp.

Kate Narveson's *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* provides a carefully considered analysis of lay devotional writing and the authors, particularly the women, who shaped and were shaped by it. The premise of the book is that the widespread lay practice of reading with pen in hand and writing "scripture phrase" in England during the period between 1580 and 1660 gave lay writing an authoritative biblical resonance and created devotional texts that were, in effect, self-homilies. The first half of the study focuses on the way in which devotional writers on the lower strata of society imitated clergy in doctrine and style, which resulted in a demystification of exegesis that supplied them with an "imaginative control of one's self-understanding" (p. 6). Not only did artisans and minor officials discover a "new control over one's narrative self" (p. 10), Narveson argues, but also country gentlewomen and daughters of merchants. Thus, the second half of the study places women's devotional writing in this context of lay devotional piety in order to "move beyond the problematic essentialism of a focus on 'a woman's voice'" (p. 15) and explore instead the ways in which scriptural literacy created space for ownership of religion among ordinary laity of both sexes (p. 200). In the end, rather than showing ways in which lay reading and writing, especially among women, flowed from an attempt to subvert power structures, Narveson demonstrates that lay members who were committed to the church (paradoxically?) effected "a

shifting of the center of piety from the pew to the prayer closet,” “leveling the spiritual discourse” as they crafted their own spiritual identities (p. 215).

The first half of the study supplies a robust framework for the second, and Narveson attempts to combine book history’s focuses on practices of reading and writing, demonstrating how the methods of both were mutually formative. Active readers of scripture become thoughtful composers; for example, Narveson highlights John Donne’s compulsive note-taking even as a layman and its connection to meditation (p. 51), in addition to the “collage prayers” that combine various passages of scripture into a unified prayer. By observing the organizational methods of lay biblical commonplace books and contrasting them against the perceived “simple reverential immersion” (p. 25) and “simple passive reading” (p. 23) recommended by clerical authors such as John Downname and Richard Rogers, she argues for a tension between the growing availability of print resources to the laity and submission to the authority of learned men. Despite the tone of her treatment of clerical authorities, she demonstrates that lay initiative and submission are not necessarily contradictory; the communal dimension of godly reading that involves a “deep personal conformity to the godly ideal” (p. 79) does not erase the individual but in some ways awakens it. Here she usefully joins Susan Felch in understanding authorial agency not necessarily in terms of independence from external influence but rather an active use of multiple sources (p. 65), insisting that a lack of originality does not necessarily imply a lack of independence (p. 101).

Neither does submission imply the erasure of self; a godly reader comes to an understanding of the self through the lens of scripture (p. 81). This “reading as transformation” is both passive (being acted upon by the Holy Spirit) and active (meditating and seeking growth) (p. 82)—Donne himself “does not always identify the self with its natural impulses,” and in his sermons he often demonstrates that “godly motions and effort coexist and cooperate” (p. 92). For examples of these transformative writings, Narveson turns to Richard Willis’s book of meditations that depict a world in which we are called on all sides to moral discernment (p. 107), Nehemiah Wallington’s journals in which he reads scripture as a shared text of the community (p. 116), and Anne Venn’s spiritual narrative that dramatizes the soul’s encounter with God (p. 122). In each of these examples, the writing is shaped by the biblical

stories that record God's engagement with his people, and the act of writing both creates an enduring record of that continued engagement and leads the author to apprehend the truth personally. Writing does not express an author's identity nor does tradition erase it; together they form it.

With this foundation of a widespread culture of lay devotional writing, Narveson spends the second half of the book exploring the ways in which women engaged that culture. She begins by identifying a text's discursive horizon, which she defines as "the vista of texts and discourses that appear in a compilation of composition" (p. 134), as one of the key marks of gender in early modern writing. But though education and social structures limit a woman's discursive horizon, Narveson shows that some conventions of genre that we see in devotional literature erase those particular marks of gender (p. 135). For example, in a copy of Thomas Bentley's *Monument of Matrones*, we see a text written by a man for a female readership annotated by a male reader who could ignore the gendered design of the text; if a male reader could do so, Narveson argues, so too could female readers (p. 143). Furthermore, comparing Nehemiah Wallington's *Notebook* and Elizabeth Isham's *Book of Remembrance* reveals similar discursive horizons despite the difference in gender and education and demonstrates common generic traditions that see scripture as a guide for conduct and that utilize holy books toward similar aims of self-examination (p. 147). Finally, by exploring the print conventions of devotional texts with decorated margins that prevent annotation in contrast to the "humanist page" of theological works with their Latin quotations, analytic tables, and marginal references, Narveson argues that Grace Sharrington Mildmay's fair copy of her *Meditations* follows the print conventions of the latter, specifically works like Thomas Rogers's translation of the *Imitation of Christ* and the Geneva Bible. This wide range of printing conventions that writers imitate may offer more than "a kind of freedom from gender norms" (p. 153); in some ways they render them incoherent.

The final chapter focuses specifically on Mildmay's *Meditations*, correcting the interpretations of scholars who dismiss women's devotional writing as a resignation to patriarchal power structures rather than allowing it to be a genuine expression of the author's commitments (p. 178). On the contrary, Mildmay follows a genre that allows for profound self authentication. Through her use of scripture reading

evident from frequent employment of scripture phrase, allusions, rhythms, and prophetic discourse, Mildmay achieves a confidence of voice, method, and style (p. 177). Narveson highlights the way Mildmay's prophetic voice that claims God as a source assumes spiritual authority (p. 179), and her collage meditations place "events in Scripture and in her own life as part of the same interpretive field" (p. 183). By demonstrating the ways in which devotional discourse flattens some typical authorial gender distinctions, Narveson illustrates a scene in which souls may indeed have no sexes.

The interdisciplinary approach of the study combines literary criticism, book history, and gender studies with fruitful results. Its wider perspective cautions against simplifying critical categories into reductive binaries—"containment versus subversion, indoctrination versus independent thought, male versus female . . . active or passive, rebellious or complaisant" (p. 98). In this way the book offers a well-considered corrective to interpretive flattening, convincingly demonstrating that lay devotional literature shatters such neat groupings. Narveson replaces binaries with a nuanced description of lay devotional culture that includes both poles, often in the same author or text, doing justice to the complexity of the authors and the period in which they lived. The textured portraits she creates are convincing because they are recognizably human—few of us, after all, would feel comfortable reducing ourselves to simplified binaries even if we often do so to our enemies—and because they function within categories profoundly different from our own.

Nevertheless, while the study certainly provides an important critical corrective, the simplifications it warns against are difficult to avoid entirely—even, as it turns out, for Narveson herself. Her richly nuanced lay devotional writers starkly contrast against her somewhat one-dimensional clerical authorities who attempt to keep the laity from exegesis, such as Downname and Rogers whose recommendations for carefully considered submission to learned pastors she dismisses as a "simple passive reading" (p. 23), and those she imagines viewing the growing availability of printed secondary resources as "a dangerous temptation to curiosity in lay hands" (p. 28). And again, after astutely drawing the reader's attention to the rather static generic conventions of printed devotional texts common in the period for men and women alike, Narveson states that one would expect this format to be considered

appropriate for women's devotional texts, and suggests that Bentley's lack of paratextual features indicate "that he did not intend to encourage his female readers to compose devotion" (p. 172)—fair enough, if we say the same about the majority of devotional writers regarding readers of both sexes. Yet the main thrust of Narveson's argument guards against reductive portraits of characters who are either oppressors or oppressed, who respond to authority with either conformity or resistance, and these occasional broad strokes do not affect the quality of her sketches of the authors under investigation. One could wish more of the book was devoted to a closer investigation of the mostly unfamiliar texts with Narveson's keen eye for significant detail that she combines with breadth of research and sober judgment, but in the mean time she has effectively demonstrated the wealth that remains to be gathered from these works and provided a robust critical framework for understanding them.

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